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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000127

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [TK](#)

SUBJECT: RISING ANTI-AMERICAN SENTIMENT AND U.S. POLICY  
TOWARDS IRAQ

REF: A. ISTANBUL 108 AND 114

[B](#). ANKARA 549

[11](#). (C) Summary: Widespread and increasingly vocal opposition to a possible war against Iraq is on the verge of evolving into a more general anti-American backlash in Istanbul. Our observations, Istanbul contacts, and recent polls and surveys lead us to believe that anti-American sentiment is sharply rising in Istanbul. "sessiz Although much of this opposition is directed primarily at our policies in Iraq, the overall climate provides fertile ground for extremists hostile towards the United States. Some leftist groups (including terrorist groups DHKP-C and KADEK) and the populist media tycoon and would-be politician Cem Uzan are seizing the opportunity to stir up trouble and rally support to their causes. U.S. reassurances of its commitment to Iraq's territorial integrity and support for an economic assistance package are helping to address Turkish concerns. However, sustained public diplomacy in Istanbul -- with 15% of the country's population and key opinion makers in media, higher education, and business -- remains critical to winning the Turkish public's support for our goals in Iraq. End Summary.

[12](#). (SBU) We have been following with concern the fervent and widespread opposition in Istanbul to U.S. policy in Iraq. Recent polls (E.G., the Pew Global Attitudes Project and local polls) affirm that up to 90% of Turks oppose U.S. military action against Iraq and that anti-American sentiment is on the rise in Turkey. We have observed that Istanbul reflects those trends. In recent months, ConGen Istanbul has consistently found Turks to be much more vocal and critical of U.S. policies towards Iraq and the Middle East. "No to War" bumper stickers and placards have been plastered across the city, and the Consulate has received dozens of virulent, even threatening, anti-war letters.

[13](#). (C) The frequency and attendance of anti-war demonstrations have been steadily increasing over the last month. In the largest demonstration so far, over 5000 protesters gathered in Beyazit square on January 26 brandishing placards reading "Damn U.S. Imperialism" and "We Won't Be The U.S. Soldiers" (ref A) (Note: Press reports indicate that there was a much larger demonstration in the southeastern city of Mersin on the same day. End Note). A meeting of over 2000 organizational representatives on January 25 was held in Istanbul to plan for even larger demonstrations in the coming weeks. Demonstrators dumped a (presumably) American military uniform and boots on the steps of a prominent Turkish business association last week to protest the chairman's recent "hawkish" public remarks. Turkish police sources told us last week that they suspect that these demonstrations are being secretly sponsored by various anti-American leftist groups, including DHKP-C, MLKP (Marxist Leninist Communist Party), and KADEK (formerly the PKK) terrorist cells.

[14](#). (SBU) Others are also seizing the opportunity to fan the flames of anti-Americanism and gather personal support. Recent spurious allegations that the U.S. has had official contacts with KADEK/PKK in northern Iraq have received considerable Istanbul-based national press coverage (ref B). Additionally, media tycoon and Youth Party leader Cem Uzan has reached out to all of Istanbul (as well as the rest of Turkey) over the last week with an enormous anti-American media campaign (Note: Uzan's Youth Party emerged just a few months before last year's November 3 elections and captured over 7 percent of the national vote with its anti-American, anti-Western populist rhetoric. End Note). Using print, radio, and television, Uzan has put out a well-crafted, populist, anti-war message under the title "Who is the U.S. Attacking?" Uzan's message strikes popular chords by touching on themes like "Turkey should make its own decision on war," "The U.S. has not kept its promises to compensate Turkey for \$100 billion in damages from the Gulf War," and "Who will suffer from this anti-Muslim U.S. aggression?" Not content with using his private media outlets, Uzan has bought air and radio time as well as entire pages in all of the major newspapers. Local staff tells us that this campaign is unprecedented in its coverage and cost.

15. (U) All of this is troubling to Americans who know Turkey well. Turkish hospitality is unstinting and Turkish-American friendship runs deep. Additionally, U.S. "soft power" in Turkey appears alive and well. Turkey sends over 10,000 students to study at American universities every year (placing it in the top ten countries worldwide). Turkish television routinely features American programs (current fare includes Friends, Ally McBeal, Dawson's Creek, and NYPD Blue) in prime time network slots, and NBC and CNN also have popular local franchises. American films dominate local theaters, and American pop music has made significant inroads in local radio programming. U.S. products, from McDonald's and Coca-Cola to Ford automobiles and Boeing aircraft, are commonplace.

16. (SBU) Nonetheless, our sense is that the reservoir of good will towards the United States is gradually being depleted. Simple opposition to U.S. policies (i.e. "what we do") among the large majority of Turks who are generally sympathetic to the U.S. is spilling over and contributing to the small core of anti-American Turks who dislike "who we are." The Pew Project found that only 31 percent of Turks had a positive view of "Americans" (versus 30 percent of the U.S.), 78 percent viewed the spread of U.S. ideas and customs negatively, and 46 percent disliked American popular culture. The timing and the discrepancy between the intensely pro-American mood in late 1999 and early 2000 (following former President Clinton's November 1999 visit to Turkey) and the generally pessimistic mood last summer during the waning months of the unpopular Ecevit government may have exaggerated these numbers. But this cannot fully account for the sharp turn in public opinion against the United States that we observe in Istanbul.

17. (SBU) Most Istanbul Turks continue to value the U.S.-Turkey strategic alliance and enjoy American products. Adversely affected by the ongoing economic crisis, however, many in this group mistakenly blame the IMF (and, by extension, the U.S.) for the country's crushing debt and the current strict economic program. Initially sympathetic to the U.S.'s war on terrorism, most of them have since come to believe that the operations directed against Afghanistan and, now, Iraq are heavy-handed personal American vendettas and perhaps even anti-Islamic in nature. They feel that the U.S. has its priorities confused (i.e., Iraq before Israel/Palestine) and is bent on pursuing its goals unilaterally with little regard for international, and particularly Turkish, opinion.

18. (SBU) Comment: Our contacts in Istanbul, like embassy contacts elsewhere in the country, have never been fond of Saddam Hussein; most recognize that he represents a threat to regional stability, and many even admit that he probably does have biological and/or chemical weapons. Nonetheless, there is a strong, widespread Turkish desire to preserve stability in the region - critical for Turkey's economic and political development. Much of the opposition to an operation against Iraq rests with our contacts' pessimistic predictions of the duration of hostilities, an unstable post-war power vacuum, and the possible disintegration of the Iraqi state into several components, including a Kurdish north. CONGEN reassurances -- that we would prefer a peaceful solution to war, that we will continue to seek wide international support for any necessary military operation, that we are committed to Iraqi territorial integrity and long-term regional stability, and that we are prepared to help Turkey weather the negative economic shocks of a war -- have gone a long way towards addressing these concerns. Continued multilateral diplomacy and public diplomacy efforts to address these basic concerns will be critical to winning the Turkish public's support for our goals in Iraq. End Comment.

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